

III. Finding Volunteers

With a bit of effort, interested people can be trained, multiplying the amount of work being accomplished on an SNA. However, volunteers are not free and do require support from DNR staff. In order to maximize the DNR associated support costs, we want to attract volunteers who are the best fit for the program. If qualified individuals are not already available from within the program, we need to work through the following steps:

1. Develop a list of management needs across sites of management responsibility.
2. Rank sites according to need and determine those where it will be easiest to establish a steward.
3. Identify and approach potential partner organizations.
4. Engage potential individuals/groups with workdays or projects (and see who emerges as a leader) or select individuals by advertising with job positions.
5. Take time to engage the volunteers who are currently involved.

A. Develop a list of management needs across sites of management responsibility.

The SNA manager/steward develops a list of needs that volunteers could be engaged to help with. Helpful questions to consider in this process:

- Do current staff members/volunteers have tasks they would like to share with others, freeing them up to do other things?
- What needs to be done that staff/volunteers don't have the skills or time to do effectively?
- What projects on the wish list are on the back burner because no one has time to do them?

B. Rank sites according to need and determine those where it will be easiest to establish a steward.

A high ranking would be given to sites with a high need for work, physically easy work, and close to possible volunteer sources. Rank sites based on these characteristics.

Quality need ranking

Sites receiving a high quality need ranking would be those with high value for the SNA program. Rare remnant plant communities, large protected areas, and diverse and healthy remnants would increase a site's quality need ranking.

Ease of work ranking

Sites receiving a high ease of work ranking would be those with projects that are easy for volunteers to accomplish (aspen girdling, seed collecting, phragmites bundling, brush cutting, pulling scattered invasive weeds, etc.). Volunteers enjoy dramatic results, so projects showing results quickly would increase a site's ease of work ranking. Sites with challenging access or physically challenging projects would fall lower on the ranking list.

Volunteer source ranking

Sites with a high likelihood of attracting volunteers would receive a high volunteer source ranking. The likelihood of attracting volunteers increases first with established groups nearby who are experienced or interested in land management. Then with an available population source close by.

C. Identify and approach potential partner organizations.

Organizations are very valuable sources of volunteers. Their mission may dovetail with the mission of the SNA volunteer program. They may be successful because there are multiple individuals and an organizational structure backing them up. Job descriptions or projects will be kept on hand in case groups are actively looking for ways to volunteer. Examples of groups to involve are: Friends groups, land trusts, Ice Age Trail Alliance, university clubs, hunting groups, Trout Unlimited, nature centers, school groups, church groups, scout troops, geocaching groups, lake associations, county parks, etc.

D. Engage potential individuals/groups with workdays or projects (and see who emerges as a leader) or select individuals by advertising with job positions.

Occasionally all that needs done is to suggest the idea of a group having workdays. Other times, the group may be very interested but needs help getting started. Potential groups can get kick started by having someone (DNR staff or experienced volunteers) work with them to organize a workday or two. Set goals that are fairly easy to accomplish at first and see how things go. After having several workdays, potential individuals/group volunteers who ask questions showing their engagement level may stand out. These people may be on board and experienced enough to start projects or schedule workdays.

The people who organize or regularly attend are the future leaders—spend the most time talking to and teaching them how to do the work, and then find ways to engage these potential leaders' strengths to help the program and give them more ownership. When they are ready, allow them to lead teams and workdays themselves, staying involved as they take on new things. After they have lead several workdays, talk with the volunteer to see if becoming a steward is a good fit with the leader.

If no individuals/groups are available or have emerged after leading several workdays, find them by advertising with job positions. Job positions highlighting expectations are created by the SNA manager, regional volunteer coordinator, and/or steward. Job positions include the goal/purpose of the position, who the volunteer reports to, the length of time the volunteer is expected to work, the time commitment they will make, volunteer responsibilities, volunteer qualifications desired, the support the DNR offers, and the benefits the volunteer gains from the work. See [Appendix J](#) for an example.

Some possible positions: Seed Collector, Brush Clearer, Summer Invasive Species Specialist, Aspen Girdler, Steward, Apprentice Steward, Photopoint Monitor, Invasive Species Mapping Specialist, etc. There should be corresponding maps and any necessary descriptions associated with these positions. The needs are kept by the regional volunteer coordinator and may be published on the website. The SNA manager and regional volunteer coordinator determine the best method of ensuring the volunteer is properly trained in the field.

E. Take time to engage the volunteers who are currently involved.

Staff and volunteer leadership time is best spent engaging, coaching, encouraging, and working with current or potential volunteer leaders.

Here are some ideas (from The Nature Conservancy) on what motivates volunteers.

- A sense of accomplishment.
- A sense of belonging. We like to think of an organization as “my chapter” or “my school.”
- People like personal responsibility, their own project or “turf,” yet they want to be part of the big picture and see how their efforts are contributing to an end result. Note: teams of people can also have turf.
- The opportunity to think and help make decisions. People want to feel they are part of the decision-making process. Whether or not every suggestion is used isn’t nearly as important as the volunteer knowing that the steward is sincerely listening.
- Obtainable goals. People want to see their efforts come to fruition. Realistic goals are important to keeping a sense of momentum and accomplishment among volunteers. They must be able to see progress or know what the eventual result of their efforts will be.
- Purposeful, defined activity. Volunteers like to feel their efforts are accomplishing something worth their investment of time, talent, and effort. They also want to know exactly what is expected. Figure out in advance how much time a job requires, whether it can be done at home or on the site, and if it requires working alone or with others.
- Challenges within abilities. An assignment should be challenging, but if it is totally beyond one’s abilities the person is likely to give up. Be available to give advice and give volunteers periodic training in the subjects applicable to their assignments. If a job seems huge, then break it down into two or three smaller jobs, or form a committee to do it.
- Information. This is probably the most important duty of the steward. Too many times we’ve heard someone say with a touch of bitterness, “No one tells me what’s going on around here.” It takes time to make that phone call or write an email, but it’s worth the investment. Keep volunteers updated with newsletters and invitations to attend meetings and conferences, and encourage them to submit information and stories to the newsletter.
- Confidence. Some folks run the whole show, not because there is no one else to do it but because they don’t trust others and may have conveyed that feeling. But you may have a volunteer whose skills exceed your own. Let them know you think they can do the job, then give them the freedom to do it.
- Recognition. It only takes seconds to say, “Thanks for your help. I really appreciate it.” No matter how self-effacing people appear, most appreciate a little pat on the back. Think of ways to publicly thank volunteers as well.